

# Justice System-Involved Veterans at Increased Risk for Suicide



## From Science to Practice

Using Research to Promote Safety and Prevent Suicide

### Issue

People with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system are at increased risk for suicide.<sup>1</sup> This applies to individuals at any point along the justice-system continuum: arrest, arraignment, adjudication, incarceration, and community re-entry. In fact, suicide is the leading cause of death among people in local jails<sup>2</sup> and one of the leading causes of death for people in state and federal prisons, particularly among inmates ages 18–34.<sup>3</sup> Justice system-involved Veterans, who make up about one-tenth of the incarcerated population in the United States,<sup>4</sup> are also at increased risk for suicide.<sup>5,6</sup> This is most likely because justice-system involvement and suicide share similar risk factors.<sup>7</sup> That said, published research on justice-involved Veterans is limited.

### Key Findings

- An internal study of Veterans Health Administration patient data found that Veterans involved in either the Health Care for Re-entry Veterans or the Veterans Justice Outreach program were generally at greater risk than other Veterans for suicide attempts and deaths.<sup>8</sup> They were also more likely than other Veterans to have a mental health or substance use disorder and to experience homelessness.<sup>8</sup>
- People are at particular risk for suicide immediately following arrest,<sup>9</sup> with nearly half of suicides in jails occurring in the first week of custody.<sup>10</sup>
- As observed among individuals released from psychiatric institutions, the period of transition from incarceration to community re-entry is a time of heightened mortality risk. Risk for suicide, including among Veterans, is elevated during the first 12 months following release from prison and particularly elevated in the first month.<sup>11,12</sup> This also applies to those released on parole. An analysis of National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) data found that parolees were twice as likely as nonparolees to report suicidal ideation (8.6% versus 3.7%, respectively).<sup>13</sup>
- People involved in the criminal justice system are at elevated risk for suicide even if they are not incarcerated. Another analysis of NSDUH data

found that respondents who had been arrested in the previous year were almost twice as likely as respondents who had not been arrested to have attempted suicide, while those who had been arrested multiple times in the previous year were more than three times as likely to have attempted suicide.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, a study in Denmark found that justice-system involved people who did not receive a guilty verdict or a prison sentence were at increased risk for suicide compared with people with no history of justice-system involvement.<sup>1</sup>

### Implications

Suicide and criminal justice system involvement have similar risk factors, such as mental health and substance use disorders. Also, stressors associated with justice-system involvement — such as feelings of uncertainty and shame, the disruption of interpersonal relationships, and financial burdens — may further increase suicide risk following arrest, during incarceration, and during parole. More research is needed to better understand the relationship between justice-system involvement and suicide, particularly among Veterans. In the meantime, clinicians should assess for suicide risk among Veterans with any history of involvement in the justice system.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

## Ways You Can Help

- Clinicians, including those who treat patients in correctional facilities, should routinely inquire about Veteran status, history of justice-system involvement, and suicide risk factors (including mental health and substance use disorders, traumatic brain injury, homelessness, perceived lack of social support, hopelessness, and a history of trauma).<sup>8,9</sup>
- Connect Veterans who have been involved in the justice system with resources intended to help them in their transition out of incarceration, such as programs that provide employment and housing assistance. Also, when Veterans who have a mental health or substance use diagnosis leave correctional facilities, ensure that they have a plan for continued treatment.
- Consider cognitive behavioral therapy for justice-system involved Veterans who have a history of trauma or who perceive that they lack social support.<sup>9</sup>
- Visit [www.va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp#contacts](http://www.va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp#contacts) for information about the Health Care for Re-entry Veterans program and [www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp) for information about the Veterans Justice Outreach program. Contact the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist at your local VA medical center to assist in outreach to justice-system involved Veterans.

**There is no single cause of suicide. It is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. To prevent Veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors and minimize risk factors at all of these levels.**

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